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1975

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BOOK REVIEWS

ANA MARÍA MARTÍN CASTILLEJOS
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Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath

Heather Clark

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020, 1152 pp.
ISBN: 9780307961174

Heather Clark earned her Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Harvard University and her PhD in English from Oxford University. *Red Comet* is her third book and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; the publication won the National Book Critics Circle Award, the LA Times Book Prize in Biography, and became the New York Times Top Ten Book of 2021. Other books written by Clark are *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (2011) and *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972* (2006). A professor of contemporary poetry at the University of Huddersfield, she divides her time between Yorkshire, England, and New York.

Clark's *Red Comet* is the most detailed biography of Sylvia Plath written so far, a monumental work that required eight years of this critic's life. This latest biography on Plath draws on recently released material from and about the poet. As Clark states in the prologue of the book, her main goal was "to recover Sylvia Plath from cliché—to offer an alternative narrative to the Plath myth, to debunk the sensational and melodramatic rhetoric that surrounds her, and, finally, to examine her life through her commitment not to death, but to art" (Prologue).¹ Clark seems to be conscious of writing a biography of one of the greatest American poets in the 20th century and not only the story of the cursed poet, like previous writers before her. The author's account of Plath's life and writings is simply outstanding for the amount of data that she offers.

Clark also explains, in the meticulous style that characterizes her entire book, that her biography incorporates for the first time all surviving letters, making use also of "unpublished diaries, calendars and creative work in addition to her published writings" (Prologue). Moreover, Clark also researches Plath's family history, including her father's FBI interrogations and her grandmother's institutionalization; she makes reference to what has remained of *Falcon Yard*, Plath's lost novel, and offers the testimony and archival information of more than fifty contemporaries. Furthermore, Clark describes in detail Plath's last week alive to offer a new reading of the events, draws on all the Hughes archives at Emory University and the British Library that contain many unpublished poems and references about Plath, and incorporates material from the Harriet Rosenstein archive at Emory University, which opened in 2020 (Prologue).

¹ The references used for Heather Clark's *Red Comet* correspond to the Kindle edition.

Nevertheless, even if Clark's attempt to collect as much information as possible on the writer is worth praising, as there has never been a biography as complete as hers before, there have been previous attempts to portray Plath's life. Some of her best biographies include Linda W. Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath, a Biography* (1987), the first book about Plath to quote unpublished journals and letters available at that time. Like many other books on the poet, it had to face the censorship of the Plath estate, which was not a problem for Clark. Ann Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989) offers an account of the life of the writer, which was approved by Ted Hughes and passed also through Olwyn Hughes' censorship. This biography recognizes Plath as a literary genius but there is a clear emphasis on Plath's personality disorder and deep psychological difficulties, while Hughes comes out blameless. In this respect, we can affirm that Clark's biography is more balanced. Steven Gould Axelrod's *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (1990) combines the rhetoric of psychoanalysis and the rhetoric of literary criticism to show that there is a narrative of the double in many of Plath's writings. Plath's tendency to see through polarities (202) would end up with her poem "Edge," where Plath's double finally dies (202). Even if *Red Comet's* final purpose is a different one, there are often mentions in the book to Plath's psychological troubles. Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991) mainly focuses on how Plath writes of psychic processes, and the way she generously lets us into her mind (x). At the time Rose was writing her book she also had numerous problems with the Plath estate that she explains in depth (xi). Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic* (1991), the most complete biography of Sylvia Plath up to that year, focuses on facts, archival research and interviews: "I conducted some three hundred individual interviews," says Alexander (1991, 1). Nevertheless, many of the manuscripts were still controlled by the Plath estate, a situation that only relaxed once Ted Hughes passed away in 1998. Finally, Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* (1994) is not so much a book about Sylvia Plath's life but about what happened after her suicide: how Ted Hughes became executor of her estate and Olwyn Hughes, his sister, became Hughes' literary agent to protect the writer. In her book, Malcolm portrays Plath as the "divided self par excellence" (89).

With respect to *Red Comet*, the book is divided into three parts and also contains two epilogues. The first part starts in 1850, in Poznan, at that time a small city belonging to Prussia, from where the family of Otto Plath, Sylvia's father, born in 1885, emigrated; and it finishes in August 1955, once Plath completed her studies at Smith College. The second section of the book begins in September 1955, when the poet travels to Cambridge to study there with a Fulbright grant, and it finishes in December 1959, when Plath and her husband, Ted Hughes, leave Yaddo, a retreat for artists in Saratoga Springs, New York. The third and last part of the biography starts in 1960, when the young couple move to London, and it lasts until February 1963, when Plath commits suicide. The first epilogue describes events immediately after Plath's death, and what happened with Hughes' and Plath's families, their children, their friends and also Assia Wevill, who was one of the women Hughes was dating at the time of Plath's death and who would kill herself and her daughter in 1969. Finally, the second epilogue deals with the publication of Plath's literary work and the impact this had soon after her death.

Regarding what is new in Clark's biography, it is clear that beside focusing on Plath she also writes extensively about Ted Hughes and his work. In her own words, "This is the first biography of Sylvia Plath to examine those 'intolerable similarities' in depth, and to take Plath and Hughes's literary dialogue—and rivalry—seriously" (Prologue). Furthermore, Hughes is not presented as an enemy but as the writer's companion and twin soul until their relationship turns sour and Plath's husband becomes her literary rival: "Horizons were no longer boundless. They had imagined a utopian marriage [...] but their positions were becoming stratified along traditional lines. [...] Sylvia's domestic workload was much heavier now, and her letters make clear that Ted's career took precedence at this time" (Part III). Furthermore, Clark's work also weaves the lives of Hughes and Plath with their historical context, so that we gain a greater understanding of their work. In this sense, the book begins by referring to the origin of the Plaths, Poznan, a city located in the Polish corridor after the Treaty of Versailles (1919), where tensions between Poles and Germans were evident. It offers infinite details of the literary and artistic environment in England and the USA in the 1950s and 1960s, explains the psychiatric care that existed at the time, and portrays the political scene in the USA under the mandate of President Roosevelt. With all this, *Red Comet* is also a good example of literary history, in addition to a biography.

Red Comet portrays Plath as an ambitious and extremely disciplined person who was always afraid of failure: "the horror, to be jamesian [sic], is to find there are plenty of beasts in the jungle but somehow to have missed all the potshots at them. I am always afraid of letting 'life' slip by unobtrusively and waking up some 'fine morning' to wail windgrieved around my tombstone" (Prologue), she would write to Gordon Lameyer, her boyfriend at that moment. Apart from her own personal ambitions, this could also be connected to Otto Plath's death, after which the family suffered hardships and had to be extremely careful with money. In fact, Plath's professional aspirations made her wish to become a great poet and surpass other writers of the time, such as Adrienne Rich, who was also struggling with motherhood and domestic issues: "Plath once asked Rich, who had two small children, whether it was possible to combine writing and motherhood. Rich told her, 'Yes, but it's hellishly difficult'" (Part II), to admit immediately afterwards: "What I wanted to tell her was 'Don't try,' because I was in such despondency... I couldn't foresee a future different from the past two years of raising children and being almost continuously angry" (Part II). In this respect, living in the US in the 1950s, a period of time when women were supposed to be the angels of the house, implied that women could be beaten if they got "hysterical" after remaining at home the whole day working non-stop in domestic issues. They could also be taken to an asylum for

a short time or even receive electroshock sessions for the same reason until they calmed down and could take care of all the domestic chores again. In Clark's words, "In the 1950s, women's discharge from mental hospitals often hinged on their desire to resume their feminine duties as wives and mothers. Those 'who refused to function domestically, in terms of cleaning, cooking, childcare and shopping' when they returned home, as one 1961 study showed, were often recommitted" (Part I).

Plath herself went through electroshock therapy after her first suicide attempt and from then on she was always extremely concerned about the possibility of having to undertake the same treatment once again. Elinor Friedman Klein, who met Plath, explained to Clark in an interview why Plath was so scared: "She told me that it was like being murdered, it was the most horrific thing in the world for her. She said, 'If this should ever happen to me again, I will kill myself'" (Prologue). Regarding Plath's mental disorders, she had always been described as someone suffering from mental problems due to her own personal circumstances but in the first part of Clark's book, we also get to learn about Ernestine, Otto Plath's mother, who died in an asylum for the mentally ill, and other relatives of Sylvia's father who also suffered from depression (Part I). This is again a novelty regarding previous biographies. Now we know that the writer possibly inherited that genetic tendency to depression from her ancestors.

We can conclude by stating that Clark's main goal in Plath's biography, basically "to examine her life through her commitment not to death, but to art" (Prologue), is only partially achieved if we consider that nearly one third of the book (From "Error: Devon, May-June 1962" to the end) deals with the estrangement of the couple, the first infidelities, the hatred, pain, depression caused, and Sylvia Plath's and Assia Wevill's suicides. It is, in fact, very difficult to talk about Plath and her work without ignoring her sad end. There is a moment in her life when everything seemed to collapse and the writer did not have the necessary strength to overcome her situation. The end of her final struggle is very well described in "Edge": "The woman is perfected. Her dead/ Body wears the smile of accomplishment, the illusion of a Greek necessity" (Plath 1965, 84). The poems reflect the attainment of a final inner peace that she could not achieve in real life. Distraught after Hughes' abandonment and the final violence that surrounded the breakup of the couple, Plath only found the perfection that she always sought in life in the fabulous last poems that would be collected in *Ariel*.

Regarding the possibility of another biography with new released material from Plath's journals that would complete Clark's book, we can refer to Karen Kukil's own words in 2021, at the time when she had just stopped being the curator of Plath's papers at Smith College after 30 years:

Ted Hughes held out the prospect of the reappearance of the earlier of these two journals: 'Pe earlier one disappeared more recently (and may, presumably, still turn up)' (Grand Street, page 86). I do believe this maroon-bound notebook of lined paper like the one Plath wrote when she was teaching at Smith in 1957-1958 will be discovered one day. (Martín Castillejos 2021, 24)

And, concerning further publications about Plath, Kukil also added: "Plath may have written as many as 700 additional letters that Peter Steinberg and I were not able to locate. [...] Plath's childhood diaries in the Lilly Library at Indiana University, Bloomington could also be published. Scholars would also like complete scholarly editions of Plath's poetry and prose" (Martín Castillejos 2021, 25). Yet, when reflecting on the same issue Clark seems to have a different point of view:

[Hughes] hinted that "so-called friends" had stolen many of Plath's manuscripts in the weeks following her suicide. He may have destroyed her last novel, as Assia had wished, as well as her journals from 1960 to 62, though in 1981 Hughes told Alvarez that the journals had "walked, not too long ago." [...] he said publicly that he had destroyed Plath's final 1963 journal to protect her children, though he later hinted to the critic Jacqueline Rose that it might still exist. (Epilogue)

Hence, even if these two versions are somehow contradictory, it seems clear that there is still room for more publications with new released material about Plath. That said, it is fair to add that *Red Comet* must be recognized as the most complete and accurate book written to date on Sylvia Plath.



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