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The Unwritten Sylvia Plath Biographies

Abstract: Sylvia Plath's belonging to the literary modernist canon turns the issue of her biographical iconography into a problematic matter, as late modernist critical directions considered biography a flawed concept and practice with a poor reflective capacity. Moreover, the first generation of prospective Plath biographers abandoned their projects at various stages in their progress, leaving a consistent amount of archival material that needs re-exploration and reinterpretation. I propose a revisiting of the Harriet Rosenstein Sylvia Plath archive and of Elizabeth Hinchliffe's unfinished Plath biography, preserved as a manuscript, in order to highlight the relevance and impact of these initial biographies on later perspectives on Plath's literary art and life.

Keywords: Literary Archives; Sylvia Plath Studies; Biography; Literary Recovery; Critical Rereading.

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The Biography Riddle

Sylvia Plath's biography has been a problematic issue since her earliest commentators started to pursue the hermeneutic avenue that connects her art to her life. Or, more specifically, her death. Indeed, as Heather Clark noted in a recent, comprehensive and recalibrating biography of Plath, the writer's death is an unavoidable fact that cannot be omitted from any critical approach to her oeuvre[1]. However, it is "her commitment not to death, but to art"[2] that should guide Plath biographers. Among them, there are the ones that, although they never finished their work, stand out as those who gathered, filtered, rearranged and interpreted a wide range of materials reflecting the major moments of the writer's life. In the 1970s, when Plath studies were emergent and the competition for the first official biography had become a matter of stringent interest to the Plath estate, managed by Ted Hughes' sister, Olwyn Hughes, the research carried out by Harriet Rosenstein, a young feminist scholar who was also documenting a PhD thesis, and Elizabeth Hinchliffe was, in many ways, a pioneering act. Along with Lois Ames, who had been appointed Plath's official biographer by the author's

estate in 1968, Rosenstein and Hinchliffe were the first literary scholars who took on the high-stakes task of designing and writing the American poet's biography.

Less than a decade after Plath's death, her literary mythology was visibly emergent, and Rosenstein had the unique chance to be a part of its shaping. However, the strict regimen imposed by the Plath estate, controlling virtually all Plath biographical scholarship hindered Rosenstein's efforts and she never finished her project, nor did Hinchliffe or Ames. Starting in 2020, Rosenstein's archive, now at Emory University in the US, entered the circuit of Plath studies in both physical and digital format and became widely available to scholars. Rosenstein's interviews with Plath's inner circle (over 90 hours of recordings) clearly outline the archive's potential as a project of literary recovery illuminating aspects that could have shaped differently the biographical edifice of Sylvia Plath scholarship. I shall engage critically with recent Plath biographies[3] in order to reinforce the "transgressive nature"[4] of the biographical genre, while I also propose a remapping of its main arguments resonating with Plath's status as emblematic woman writer of late modernism/postmodernism. My aim is to extract the biographical narrative Harriet Rosenstein and Elizabeth Hinchliffe outlined in the materials they gathered for their Sylvia Plath biographies and reflect on the ways in which it could carve its own niche in the genre. Such a critical endeavour could, in Lisa Stead's terms, "challenge the limits of existing methodological approaches to textual study"[5] projecting the articulation of a literary biography from an archival background. Drawing from theories and conceptual approaches to archival study[6] I propose a reading of the Rosenstein archive and Hinchliffe's manuscript as fragmentary, material and digital repositories that call for a critical inquest into their biographical potential. My aim is to o read these projects in a comparative manner meant to reveal potential avenues of research that could have shaped a different paradigm of Plath biographical studies.

The biographical has long been a nexus of Sylvia Plath studies, garnering critical attention and generating constant debate. The newly available material from Smith College (Plath's letters to her psychiatrist) and Emory University (The Sylvia Plath Harriet Rosenstein archive) challenges Plath scholars to revisit, rethink and reintegrate this essential dimension into a new conceptual frame. Biography has a long history of being considered a lesser literary genre, rooted in popular sensationalism, separated from the high premises of modernist aestheticism. As Hermione Lee argues in her investigation of the genre, there's been a mounting "literary case against biography", one that "has its roots in aestheticism, in the idea of the separateness and purity – or amorality – of the work of art"[7]. In the case of Sylvia Plath, the separation between life and work has proved particularly problematic especially due to her emblematic status in the modernist confessional canon. Janet Malcolm credits Plath's "not niceness"[8], that is the often brutal, violent and uncompromising tone of her poetry and prose as the element that transformed her into a paradigmatic voice of confessional literature. This is what Hughes highlighted as her ultimate mark of authenticity, which proved critically divisive, as it simultaneously invited and rejected biographical readings of Plath's

oeuvre. In a targeted analysis concerning Plath's biographers, Janet Malcolm made concise remarks on the difficulty of defining biography in unequivocal terms, involving, in connection to biographical research and narrative, an entire arsenal of violent, even destructive gestures: "The biographer at work, indeed, is like the professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers [...] and triumphantly bearing his loot away"[9]. Conflict has been lying at the core of all biographical research on Plath, and the projects assembled by Rosenstein and Hinchliffe are no exception. Plath's strong ties with the modern tradition that shaped the anti-biographical stance of the new criticism and the death-of-the-author schools of critical thought at the end of the 20th century complicate such endeavours even further. In the trenches of critical theory, the "biographical fallacy"[10] designated the fundamental pitfalls of biographical reading, a warning sign against the mirroring of life into art. As many critics suggested since the early days of her rise as a singular, powerful poetic voice, Plath's biography could be read as the background that nourished and moulded her artistic becoming, a matrix that galvanized the process by which experience imprinted her art. Rosenstein and Hinchliffe's efforts to recreate a "truthful", dynamic biographical narrative of the poet must be, nevertheless, read against the entire biographical tradition that, in turns, confirmed and contradicted the cliches and fixed forms of the writer's life story. At the present moment, when both Rosenstein's archive and Hinchliffe's manuscript were included as reference points into recent, comprehensive Plath biographies, they can be reread and revisited as the initial variants of a literary portrait that has been proven protean for more than five decades.

Meta-archives

The critical challenges to the conceptual framework of biography calls for a new understanding of the genre as a reflective surface and a creative source for the literary oeuvre of the American writer. I propose an exploration of these unwritten biographies of Sylvia Plath as projects that were never finalized, remaining either as archival projects and academic writings (as in the case of Harriet Rosenstein) or as unpublished manuscripts (as in the case of Elizabeth Hinchcliffe). Both scholars carried out their research in the 1970s, when the Sylvia Plath mythologies were in full bloom and her views on women's creative lives were assimilated as proto-feminist stances by the second wave of feminist activists and thinkers. Harriet Rosenstein did an extensive documentation for a projected Plath biography that was later compacted into a PhD thesis she defended at Brandeis University. The actual book was never published. Rosenstein's massive archive, comprising over 90 hours of interviews with Plath's closest friends and collaborators, her correspondence with various significant figures in Plath's life (including Olwyn Hughes, who managed the Plath estate and played a significant role in controlling the publication of Plath biographies) and her notes on the material she had gathered. It is significant to note the particular nature of this archive as an archive about Plath, rather than a Plath archive, consisting of the author's papers, manuscripts or realia. Its role and essence are not to preserve, but to reflect and process, to select and

interpret. Rosenstein also published an essay in *Ms.* Magazine, in 1972, which could be invoked to prove the researcher's feminist critical politics. Despite the richness and diversity of the materials in her archive, Rosenstein's project to write and publish a Sylvia Plath biography never came to fruition. Hinchcliffe's work, although preserved in a 124-page manuscript that also remained unpublished, does not include the archive that she must have gathered during her documentation process. Both researchers had access to documents that are no longer (fully or partially) available, and both their projects had the potential to impact and alter the course of Plath studies, had they been approved and supported by the Plath estate. Since these materials are currently available to researchers from all over the world, given their digitization and almost universal accessibility, it is significant to note that, at least on a symbolic level, the works of Rosenstein and Hinchliffe complement one another, each bearing elements the other is missing: Rosenstein articulated a rich, diverse archive, yet she never finished the Plath biography she had planned to write; Hinchcliffe wrote a short biography, but the archive that supports it remains unavailable. The archive and the manuscript have nourished, though, some relevant recent projects that have specifically tried to recover Plath from the very tradition of Plath studies that included several attempts at constructing a neutral biographical edifice that often overshadowed Plath's centrality in the literary canon of late modernism. Heather Clark's comprehensive *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (2020), Carl Rollyson's romanticized *The Last Days of Sylvia Plath* (2020) and Emily van Duyne's impassioned, militant *Loving Sylvia Plath: A Reclamation* (2024) are, so far, the most visible approaches to Plath's life and work drawing from the research Rosenstein and Hinchcliffe did more than five decades ago. Their unfinished effort was converted into a significant resource for a critical rereading of Plath's life and work that bears the obvious disadvantage of a late restorative investigation and the advantage of a more favourable timing, when the dynamics of the former Plath/Hughes family have drastically changed. These recent Plath biographies intersected memories and re-evaluations from the last living witnesses with already curated material from Rosenstein and Hinchcliffe, among others. Objectivity has proved challenging for many critics that embarked on the unpredictable journey of exploring Plath's complex status as a female writer in 1950's and early `60s Great Britain and America. Janet Malcolm makes a brief inventory of the Plath biographies that had, since the late 1970's garnered significant critical attention, noting that they articulate "a signature story of the fearful, double-faced fifties. Plath embodies [...] the schizoid character of the period"[11]. There is the world of her writing, immersed in surrealism, deeply fractured by a sense of crisis and inner displacement, and, at the same time, there's her domestic and professional life, with all its challenges and idiosyncrasies.

An important observation should be made at this point: Plath biographies are works that often signal the distinct mission of their authors, and, recently, this has been revealed as the necessary re-evaluation of the relationship between biography and oeuvre, between the life circumstances of writing and the writing itself. Plath's case is

notoriously difficult from this perspective, as many of the critics that founded the mythologies fuelling the writer's posthumous cult status tightened the ties between literature and life, intentionally blurring the lines between them. A comparative perspective clarifies this direction. 1971 and 1972 were the years that two significant approaches to this issue were published: Al Alvarez's *The Savage God. A Study of Suicide* (specifically the last chapter, about Sylvia Plath) and, less notoriously, Harriet Rosenstein's essay *Reconsidering Sylvia Plath*. Before reconstructing his hypotheses into a compact book chapter, Al Alvarez wrote about Plath's biographical convolutions in *Sylvia Plath: A Memoir*, published in "The New American Review" in 1971[12]. These interventions reflect a clear ideological opposition that has long remained less explored than other aspects of Plath's reception, but, since the opening of Rosenstein's archive in 2020, it must be reevaluated and integrated into new critical avenues. Alvarez's study is a foundational discourse in Plath mythology, as it postulates some of the most vehemently defended biographical cliches in Plath scholarship – the intricate inner landscape of inescapable anxiety, conflict and depression that ignited and nourished her most fertile creative outbursts and the notion that Plath gambled with death in the hope that, once again, she would be saved, like she was after her first suicide attempt, at age 20, in 1953. Alvarez's speculation that, although a pathological background shaped the horizon of Plath's strongest poetic art, her suicidal gestures could be read as thinly-veiled cries for attention from family and, later, her husband. This well-argued victimization of Plath was partially contradicted by Dr. John Horder's interventions later in the 1970s, most notably in the interview he gave Rosenstein and in their subsequent correspondence. The London GP who treated her intermittently during her London years and in her final months, described aspects that add significant layers of meaning to the long-debated interference between mental illness, suicide and writing. Alvarez's commentary was not the first occasion that facilitated a biographical prejudice that could manipulate the reader to filter Plath's creation through the lens of real-life contexts. In his *Preface* to the first edition of Ariel, published shortly after Plath's death, Robert Lowell, the American poet whose seminars Plath had attended in 1959, at Boston University, outlines this type of reading that would grow exponentially over the years. His perspective would come to define a critical tradition centred on Plath's death, one that Elizabeth Hinchcliffe seems to implicitly adhere to, as she chose to begin her unpublished Plath biography, *The Descent of Ariel*, structured in two parts, with *The Death of Sylvia Plath* (the other one being *The Life of Sylvia Plath*). Hinchliffe (like Rosenstein) had access to information that proved cardinal to the accurate understanding of some relevant events in Plath's biography. The Hinchcliffe manuscript remained not only unpublished, but also unfinished, and its title was not final, only provisional. It was abandoned in the mid-1970s, as conflicts with the Plath estate escalated, just as Rosenstein had abandoned her biographical project a few years earlier. At the moment, there is a copy at the Hornbake Library, The University of Maryland, College Park, included in the Frances McCullough Papers 1915–1994.

There is another copy at the British Library, as part of the Al Alvarez Papers. Jacques Derrida's notion that the archive represents an unreliable systematization of memory and on the concept of "archive fever"[13], signalling to our intention to seize the control over history and memory, can also be invoked at this point.

Despite Hinchliffe's tendency to romanticize Plath's biography, constructing a narrative that culminates with the writer's premature, excessively monetized death, she begins her itinerary with an observation that could also stand for her own belief in the restorative power of a biographical account. In one of her first paragraphs, Hinchliffe wrote: "Sylvia came to London to try to build an identity for herself as a writer, a critic, and an individual suddenly on her own"[14]. Rosenstein's *Ms.* essay highlights the same intentions – the young feminist researcher tried to establish a sophisticated paradigm for Plath as a feminist writer, or, better said, a woman writer struggling for affirmation and recognition in an unfavourable environment. Hinchliffe's writing in free indirect speech resembles a narrative closer to fictional prose than to biographical distancing in a balanced tone. Her two-part approach to Plath's death, life and art confirms the powerful undercurrent of the age – that of trying to integrate Plath's death into her intellectual and personal narrative by attempting to make sense of it in similarly intellectual terms. Although she did not disclose her sources, nor did she use notes or bibliography, it is evident that Hinchliffe had interviewed many of her friends and acquaintances and had access to documents and information that were available to researchers and scholars. Plath's suicide note is a particularly significant example, as Hinchliffe's manuscript contains the only photocopy of this document. It is unclear if the researcher had access to the original note or to another photocopy, but she did provide a clear description of the image, suggesting that, while writing it, Plath's pen had run out and she had to change it to continue. Clark further developed this interpretation, integrating it into a revelatory comment concerning the writer's state of mind before her suicidal act. Hinchliffe's lack of references, her decision to protect the identity of some important actors in her final days, despite their instant recognizability – Dr. Horder is Dr. Johnson, Dr. Beuscher is Dr. Nolan, her downstairs neighbour, Trevor Thomas, is Philip Evans – attest to her intention to write an accessible, "popular" biography of Plath. However, this draft, despite its gaps and stylistic shortcomings, does not lack in intellectual interest for Plath's art and creative discipline. Hinchliffe takes extensive measures to ensure clarity about the writer's personal belief in art as a daily struggle, an often incommensurable effort that constantly needs to be made in order to refine and finalize one's writings. Hinchliffe's literary commentary on Plath's Ariel writings and on the impact The Bell Jar's lukewarm critical reception had on her has opened perspectives that have been refined, repeatedly, with each new generation of critics. One of the greater merits of Hinchliffe's manuscript is the fact that it brings forth the importance of an imminent event that might have triggered the writer's psychotic suicidal crisis – as Dr. Horder confirmed repeatedly in interviews, the morning she died by suicide would have been the morning she was set to enter a psychiatric

hospital for specialized treatment. Plath re-entering to frightful climate of a psychiatric hospital bearing the recent wound of an irreparable rift with Dr. Beuscher was the apex of an accumulation of an apparently unsurmountable state of despair. Hinchliffe does to abstain from pathologizing Plath – she wrote that Plath's face "was more accurate than a personality barometer in registering her wild and sudden changes of mood"[15] – but she undoubtedly creates some itineraries into the writer's last few months alive that would later be rediscovered by the biographers who had access to all the archival materials that were open to the public until then.

Later, Rosenstein's archive would reflect the landscape of this territory even more clearly. When Rosenstein wrote that "Plath has given us a vivid mythology of women"[16] she was well-aware that a meta-mythology was emergent, centred on Sylvia Plath and her death, overshadowed by feminist discourses that obliterated Plath's efforts for intellectual and artistic validation, focusing almost exclusively on the gender power struggles inside her marriage to fellow poet Ted Hughes. It could be argued, in no uncertain terms, that Hinchliffe and Rosenstein had the concrete intuition that the massive looming shape of the Plath "cult" would favour various biographical narratives (or even fictions) that would diminish her efforts to establish herself, during her lifetime, on the canonical track that she was placed on posthumously. Rosenstein wrote, in the same *Ms*. essay, that Plath "is the first female poet to create a body of verse about women"[17], and, although other women poets such as Anne Sexton could be discussed similarly, there seems to be a critical void concerning these issues. In her 2001 book, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, Tracy Brain noted that "in the years since Plath's death, her ability to create voices that might be described as hermaphrodite in their ability to slip between masculinity and femininity, or blend the two, has too often been ignored"[18]. Similarly, her work had not been read in connection to the central notions of poetry criticism, dissecting the writer's skill, vision and original craft, which prompted Brain to reclaim the urgency of a literary recovery that facilitates this approach. More than two decades later, Heather Clark's potentially definitive Plath biography would have an almost identical purpose: "Previous biographies have focused on the trajectory of Plath's suicide, as if her every act, from childhood on, was predetermined to bring her closer to a fate she deserved for flying too close to the sun. This book will trace Plath's literary and intellectual development rather than her undoing"[19]. Clark's extensive investigation, although primarily focused on Plath's status as a canonical writer of the final modernist decades, finalizes what Rosenstein and Hinchliffe highlighted as fundamental and other critics, like Brain or Malcolm deplored – Plath had to be, at some point in her tumultuous biographical tradition, extracted from the seemingly endless public fascination with her death. Although she writes with great complexity, empathy and scholarly probity, Heather Clark recentres the discourse around Plath's death, reaffirming the significance of this moment in the larger context of her life. In could be speculated, along with Claire Dederer, that Plath's alleged monstrosity as a mother who abandoned her children would seal the way in which she would be perceived

as a writer[20]. Such descriptions, along with others that place the writer under the signs of sorcery or psychosis[21] are not, as Heather Clark seems to suggest, part of the same vocabulary (albeit with a radically different meaning) – "Plath thought herself a different kind of 'sorceress'[22]: 'I am a damn good high priestess of the intellect'[23], she wrote in 1954 to a friend. Both terms point towards a higher power that the poet serves, loosening her ties with the real and migrating towards a trance-like state, while the fundamental meaning lies in the priestess' power to share the knowledge she receives with a larger audience. Moreover, this poetic ministry is justified by a sense of ascesis and purification, while sorcery points toward the obscure territories of the irrational. Faith and reason may remain separate in this line of thought, but Plath's association with the irrational is part of the problematic critical heritage discussed here. Plath's own idea of herself as a priestess of the intellect, tending to her ascetic temple of the mind, cultivating the sacred faith that intellectual life and creation are just as essential to her self-worth and fulfilment as family and domestic bliss should be reinforced and revived in biographical contexts. Clark's supremely readable and impeccably documented tome does precisely that, but the declared goal of this ultimate biography, "to examine her life through her commitment not to death, but to art"[24] hardly would have been possible without the efforts of Plath's early biographers like Rosenstein and Hinchliffe.

It is relevant to note that, for several years in the 1970s, as Rosenstein was trying to establish a collaboration with the Plath estate, she was repeatedly discouraged to pursue her project, as Lois Ames already had the full support of the estate. In her correspondence with Olwyn Hughes, who managed the estate for decades after Plath's death, and during the private meetings they had in 1970, as Rosenstein was documenting her thesis and book on Plath, she discussed concrete details concerning the estate's willingness to provide access to documents, manuscripts and unpublished materials. That was when Rosenstein was informed that she would not be granted access to Plath documents, nor would she be allowed to quote from the writer's work. In a letter dated October 13, 1970, included in the Rosenstein archive, Olwyn Hughes informed Rosenstein that "Lois Ames will be Sylvia Plath's biographer and that she has exclusive right to our help and also to exclusive access to unpublished material, letters diaries and so on for a period of 8 years from December 1969"[25]. However, Ames' collaboration with the estate had turned bitter by 1976. There is an apparent gap in correspondence between Rosenstein and Olwyn Hughes between 1972 -1976, and their letters from 1971-1972 attest to a difficult dialogue, marked by Olwyn Hughes' numerous declared disappointments and dissatisfactions with Rosenstein's approach to Plath's biography and work. This tense relationship is one of the most significant elements surrounding Rosenstein's project and the flux of events that lead to her abandoning it.

Apart from the evident richness and relevance of the material Rosenstein gathered in her archive, this corpus also contains the elements that confirm the tight control of the estate over the publication of all Plath commentary and Olwyn Hughes' often unpredictable, inflammatory rhetoric. At least on a symbolic level, Olwyn's

voice is a part of the Sylvia Plath archive. In their inquiry regarding the materials that qualify as archival elements, Crowther and Steinberg claim that a larger, more generous definition of the archive is necessary. It cannot be reduced, they argue, too often reduced to manuscripts, journals and realia. An archive should be reimagined as a space that includes other spaces, houses, institutions and landscapes- "archival holdings are like being granted access to the genesis of a Plath poem or story"[26].

After Rosenstein resumed her correspondence with Hughes, at a moment when Lois Ames no longer seemed able to fulfil her contract, there is an obvious shift in tone, as Olwyn wrote: "I very much admired, with a few exceptions [...] your stuff on Sylvia so far that I have seen, and I think you could write a marvellous biography"[27]. Rosenstein is firm in setting the terms of the potential collaboration, possibly having a clear intuition about the strategies and practices of the estate in collaborative matters: "My first concern is the right to candour - to have full access to notebooks, diaries, Mss., to count on Ted's help – and then to write a book drawing candidly on what I've learned"[28]. The exact terms of the demise of this project are unclear, as Olwyn Hughes' last letter to Rosenstein, dated August 8, 1978, suggests that the researcher might be "thoroughly jaded with Plath after all these years of being immersed by her"[29]. Two years earlier, Edward Butscher published an authorized biography of Plath, titled *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*, the first of many biographies that, either authorized or unauthorized, lay on a foundation with many empty spaces and blanks, as numerous aspects concerning Plath's biographical circumstances in her last months of life were unknown. Five decades later, Rosenstein's archive revealed aspects that contribute to a clearer horizon of Plath's life around the time of her marital crisis, separation and life as a single mother and writer in London, in the winter of 1962-1963. Moreover, it brings forth an element that could clarify the mental climate before her final, suicidal breakdown - her correspondence with Ruth Beuscher, her American psychiatrist who helped her recover after her 1953 attempt and whose advice and support Plath valued greatly.

The fourteen letters Plath wrote to Beuscher between February 18, 1960 and February 4, 1963 attest to the major influence Beuscher had over Plath and to the ethically problematic doctor-patient relationship the two women had. Besides handing her Plath's fourteen letters to her and her two letters to Plath, Beuscher gave Rosenstein interviews in which she openly discussed her patient and the many details she knew about her intimate life – sexual, relational, intellectual and emotional. Moreover, Rosenstein's interview notes from June 16, 1970, reveal details that could contribute to a clearer understanding of Plath's mental state as she descended into psychotic depression. Beuscher declared her regret that she was unable to accommodate her former patient into her home[30], despite being aware of the danger she was in as she expressed her fear that her "madness" would return – "my paralysis, my fear & vision of the worst – cowardly withdrawal, a mental hospital, lobotomies"[31]. Plath expressed her wish to return to America, but she declared she wanted to avoid living with her mother, hoping her doctor and friend could welcome her into her home. Plath wished to live in

the potentially salvatory proximity of her psychiatrist. As Dr. Horder mentioned to Rosenstein, the writer sought psychiatric care, but feared institutions and their abrasive lack of personalization. Beuscher's avoidance and implicit unavailability may have played a part in the hopelessness that preceded what might have been Plath's psychotic break. Medicated with psychiatric drugs by Horder (monoamine oxidase inhibitors, most likely Nardil or Parnate, as he alternately mentioned in interviews) Plath navigated through her last week alive in a state of despair, confusion, fear and extreme mood swings. Besides greatly enriching with much-needed detail the austere landscape of Plath's London life in January and early February 1963 (shortly after *The Bell Jar* debuted in the United Kingdom to relative critical ambivalence), Rosenstein's archive sheds new light on the central element of Plath's mythology – her death. As it becomes clear that, despite Dr. Horder's dedicated attention that far exceeded his medical duty, Plath needed urgent psychiatric help, it also becomes clear that there is an undeniable amount of unfortunate coincidences that galvanized her attitude and decisions. Despite her apparent lucidity, Plath was under the influence of a treatment that had the potential to heighten her suicidal tendencies. The interviews with Plath's doctors – Dr. Beuscher and Dr. Horder – paradoxically alter the pathologizing traditions in Plath commentary by highlighting the limitations and vulnerability of these medical professionals who both formed attachments to Plath, yet failed to save her from an anticipated crisis.

The Harriet Rosenstein Sylvia Plath archive had long been a silent vault that kept many potentially damaging secrets. By 2017, when Rosenstein decided to sell it, many of those involved directly in Plath's life story (including a part of her family and Olwyn Hughes) were dead. However, when the contents of the archive were opened to the wider public and to researchers, the details that uncovered a violent, abusive side of the Plath-Hughes marriage caused a significant controversy, bordering on literary scandal. Emily van Duyne's "reclamation"[32] is, in this sense, rather accusatory towards Ted Hughes, highlighting the gigantic cultural edifice of ignoring the malignancy of domestic abuse and partner violence. Harriet Rosenstein's archive sheds an uncomfortable light on these issues, but it also excavates an entire ecosystem that allows today's Plath researchers to revisit her work in its proximity. Van Duyne corresponded with Rosenstein, who, after a brief exchange of emails in 2021 and 2022, retreated again into the enigmatic silence that engulfed her work and research on Plath for decades. The archive speaks generously instead of its owner, but Rosenstein's ghostly presence is remarkable, too. Her notes, remarks, questions, brief recorded observations, the structure and dynamic of the interviews she took reflect her young self as a professional researcher aiming to reconcile the academic rigor of thesis writing and the captivating fluidity of a consistent biography. Hinchliffe, on the other hand, speaks through the particular dynamic of a manuscript that, beyond the implied objectivity of biography, often reads like a novel, an almost fictional retelling of Plath's life story. Van Duyne contends that the voices of the writer's earliest biographers – Rosenstein, Hinchliffe and Ames – "are lost into

history"[33]. On the contrary, their assimilation into published Plath biographies closes the circle of critical incompleteness that seems to have doomed the first decade after Plath's death. At the moment, none of the two former Plath researchers still living are willing to publicly reveal their still undisclosed works on the American poet. However, their legacy is that half a century after they had left their projects unfinalized, they stimulated and nourished the work of a new generation of critics that have, in recent years shed new light on Plath's biography and art. With the direct contribution of Rosenstein and Hinchliffe's research and writing, a new line of Plath books was finalized and published.

Conclusion

Revisiting the research projects of the first generation of prospective Plath biographers and critics is a necessary act of recovery for a wider range of researchers than the few who carried out massive documentation endeavours and published significant new Plath biographies. A rich archive and a completed manuscript structure and reflect a dramatic effort to introduce into the critical circuit and vocabulary materials, notions and representations that are rather perishable. Despite the fifty-year time gap in Plath research, Rosenstein and Hinchliffe also facilitate a turn in time that could, paradoxically, prove timely. Today's critical understanding of biography is more balanced and nuanced than former schools of thought (especially New Criticism) encouraged. Nowadays' critics explore these archival materials from a wider perspective, equipped with a more diverse conceptual framework and, relevantly enough, without the ethical or personal restrictions imposed by interested parties unwilling to let uncomfortable familial aspects be revealed and exposed. More concisely, as Plath's recent biographers prove in their complex works, her oeuvre is read, explored and written about with genuine objectivity, empathy and depth, virtually cancelling the sensationalistic, spectacular manner of former approaches. The exploration of these documents at this moment in our culture ensures that today's critical awareness of the vulnerabilities and ultimate fragility of biographical writing is at its zenith.

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Notes

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2. *Ibidem*.
3. Heather Clark, *op. cit.*; Carl Rollyson, *The Last Days of Sylvia Plath*, The University Press of Mississippi, 2020; Emily van Duyne, *Loving Sylvia Plath. A Reclamation*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2024.
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