

## Choosing Perfection

By Lyndall Gordon

“**P**erfection of the life or of the work”. Yeats posed this choice to a genius like himself. It’s a question central to Sylvia Plath, a poet who meant to resolve this choice, at its toughest for a gifted woman growing up in Eisenhower’s ultra-conformist America of the 1950s. One achievement of *Red Comet*, Heather Clark’s terrific biography of Plath, is to document, without taking sides, her choice of Ted Hughes as a revolutionary who was true to his instincts. Plath meant to invent a way of life that would make it feasible for a woman as well as a man to have everything.

She asked Hughes to marry her soon after their explosive meeting: a famously violent kiss, leaving tooth-marks on Ted’s cheek, at a Cambridge party in 1956. This was a unique marriage to a fellow-poet who could tap into the lasting force of nature, and free her to gallop into “the red /Eye, the cauldron of morning” – the fierce sun of all our days.

Clark detects the model for this in D H Lawrence, who imagined a sexual union as a semi-sacred transformation, unlike the casual affairs of Bloomsbury, who made friendship instead the be-all of human existence. In the era before second-wave feminism, *Women in Love* with its balanced marital union was an ideal for Cambridge students whom Plath joined at Newnham College.

*Red Comet* also puts forward a new norm: to read Plath as surreal rather than confessional, for confessions limit her as a mind on course for suicide. Yet feminism does inhere in her “song” of empowerment as a woman. She told her mother, “my poems and stories I want to be the strongest female paeon yet for the creative forces of nature, the joy of being a loved and loving woman; that is my song.”

Ted Hughes saw Plath's potential, and *Red Comet* fills out the 2004 revelations of Diane Middlebrook's *Her Husband*, with the evidence of mutual and wonderfully creative mentoring.

Sadly, after six years of marriage, Hughes had writer's block in the spring of 1962. Clark is persuasive in marking this as a turning point in the tragic breakdown of the poets' union. She suggests jealousy. Careful to set down the facts without the rancour of earlier feminists and to preserve as fully as possible the complexity of the situation, Clark quotes the cruel words cutting through the assurance of Plath's public carapace: her looks and ways in bed were inferior, Hughes told his wife, to those of his mistress, Assia Weevill. Plath reports that when he left her and their two children, it occurred to him that she might conveniently kill herself. She alleged earlier domestic violence resulting in a miscarriage. In the latter half of 1962, she lifted her head in loud bursts of crying in their dream home, Court Green, in Devon.

Mitigating allegations against Hughes is Clark's evidence that he continued to uphold Plath's writing. She showed him her outpouring of poems, at its peak in October 1962, including "Ariel", that headlong rhythmic ride that "I" takes into the "Eye" of sunrise. Hughes did back the blazing originality of the collection she called *Ariel*, which he published posthumously to huge acclaim.

Along with what Hughes himself had to say, deflecting blame elsewhere (most successfully in his late-life collection, *Birthday Letters*) is a crucial fact: Plath said repeatedly that what shocked her more than infidelity was lying. The lies broke her faith in her husband, in the sacredness of their Cathy-Heathcliff union, so that it was impossible for her ever to live in the same way again.

In the last months of Plath's life, Al Alvarez – the influential poetry editor for the *Observer* – replaced Hughes as a figure of heartening trust, a mentor and possibly (it's revealed) lover for one night. Clark suggests convincingly that a tie developing in October-November 1962, reaching beyond mentorship into a borderland of attraction, helped to fuel the *Ariel* poems. It

seems that when Alvarez backed off at the start of 1963, Plath's fuel diminished. Her last letter, to her American psychiatrist, Ruth Beuscher, confides her frozen will, the mental state of Plath's attempted suicide in 1953, while a student at Smith College. In the run up to that, she turned her freeze into a marvellously imagined allegory, "Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom". On a train hurtling towards the frozen Kingdom of death, a young woman exerts the will to get off at the last stop. Clark might have made more of this great story, rejected by *Mademoiselle* and recently brought to light by the *Hudson Review* with a perceptive introduction by Karen Kukil, co-editor of Plath's *Letters and Journals*.

Alvarez was partial to American poets and said that the two who thrilled him most were Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath. He had the prescience to link Plath with a poet who had written at "white heat" and for whom immortality had been the "flood subject". *Red Comet* side-lines the doomed Medea and Electra, in poems stressed by the Plath cult, in favour of Ariadne, who makes the thread to lead a way out from the lair of the monster, the Minotaur. It's a portrait of a maker who is resilient and seething with creativity in her maternal and domestic as well as writing life, together with a record of this maker's setbacks and struggles from day to day. The inward force of the poet does surge through the nets that hold her back, nowhere more keenly than when Plath left Devon for London in December 1962 and rented the place where Yeats had lived in Primrose Hill. His lines were alive in her. His blue plaque outside seemed to augur her own recognition.

After more than half a century of occlusion, the time has come to see Plath emerge now into the full daylight of her immortality. It's a time to give thanks for the discoveries of pioneering biographers, especially Diane Middlebrook, Janet Malcolm and Jacqueline Rose. Too often overlooked in this age of "definitive" biography is the art of an alternative form, the distilled biography, so I would add to this list the wise insights of Pamela Norris in *Words of Love*. Apart from these omissions, Heather Clark's meticulous research, sweeping up every scrap,

deftly integrates drafts, unpublished pieces, stories and critiques of poems. To demythologise Sylvia Plath is to make this extraordinary story more moving than ever. It will bring home to readers the enduring force of her “song”.

*Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*

By Heather Clark

Jonathan Cape. 1118 pp. £30

Lyndall Gordon's latest biography is *Outsiders: Five Women Writers Who Changed the World* (Virago and Johns Hopkins)