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THE MANY FACES OF SYLVIA PLATH

Photographs in Literary Biographies

ABSTRACT: Biography—unlike fiction—is a referential genre (Lejeune 1994, 39-40), it constantly refers to a kind of truth or reality that lies outside the textual level. Photographs in biographies function as powerful referring devices, because, as Roland Barthes (1980) put it, the essence of the photograph is “ça-a-été” (120). Regardless of this evidential character, photographs do not usually stand for themselves in biographies. They need description and textual explanation and are, thus, reduced to a merely illustrative function. This paper analyses photographs in four biographies on Sylvia Plath, who is the subject of more than 20 different literary portraits. It shows that there is a strong emphasis on Plath’s private life on the one hand, and a lack of Plath’s craft and public life on the other. By using Marita Sturken’s (1999) concept of “cultural memory” (178), this article argues that a strict differentiation between public and private cannot help us read and understand the photographs in Plath’s biographies.

KEYWORDS: Sylvia Plath, Literary Biography, Comparative Biography, Confessional Poetry, Cultural Memory.

Photographs appear very frequently in literary biographies. If photos of the biographical subject are available, then some of them are usually depicted. A photo portrait on the cover of the book usually functions as a distinctive feature of the literary genre of biography (Schmid 2009, 439) and emphasises the special relationship between biography and portrait in general. “To paint someone’s portrait” is a common metaphor for writing a biography. For Cairíona Ní Dhuíll (2009) this rhetorical trope points at the impossibility of life writing per se by shifting the narrative from the textual level into the field of the fine arts (191). Both, biography and portrait, claim to show the ‘real’ subject by uniting the surface and the inner life (Fleckner 2016, 3-4). Besides the photograph on the cover of the biography, the images can usually be found on insets in the middle of the book, printed on special paper. This is a very common practice in the genre of biography, and it entails that the photo does not adjoin the text it should illustrate. The main reason for this is usually money. Having the photos precisely where they should be either implicates the expense of printing all pages on appropriate photo paper, or the reproduction of images of poor quality (Ellis 1992, 155-156). But if having photos in biographies is expensive, why is it such a ubiquitous phenomenon?

Biography—unlike fiction—is a referential genre (Lejeune 1994, 39-40), it is constantly referring to a kind of truth or reality that lies outside the textual level. Photographs in biographies function as powerful referring devices, because as Roland Barthes (1980) put it, the essence of the photograph is “ça-a-été” (120). The photographs seem to have the ability to prove the existence of the depicted

and function as “pieces of reality” (Banita 2007, 45) which allegedly makes them more credible than a long and elaborate biographical narrative. Susan Sontag (2003) wrote in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: “A photograph is supposed not to evoke but to show. That is why photographs, unlike handmade images, can count as evidence” (47). Here lies the main role of images in biographies but there are other functions as well. Paula Backscheider (1999) notes that photographs can “highlight themes that might be overlooked [and] suggest additional facets of the subject’s life” (155). Images can also illustrate, emphasise and explain the narrative (Schmid 2009, 440). In literary biographies, they can be used for showing and explaining the working routine of the writer by depicting, for example, facsimiles, writing desks, or the author at work. They can give an insight into individual creative processes, but also into literary scenes of certain decades.

For this paper I have analysed the photographs in four biographies on Sylvia Plath. There are more than twenty different biographies that claim to tell her life’s story, published between 1976 and today. I tried to cover this long period and I chose my case studies accordingly. Edward Butscher’s *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* was the first biography on Plath, published in 1976.

One of the most recently published books on Plath is Andrew Wilson’s *Mad Girl’s Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* from 2013, the year that marked the 50th anniversary of her death. This book is what Michael Benton (2011) calls a “capsule biography” (71), it focusses on a limited period in her life. *Rough Magic: Sylvia Plath* written by Paul Alexander is from 1991 and Anne Stevenson’s *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* was published in 1989. The latter is the only biography so far that was authorized by the Sylvia Plath Estate, then under the auspices of Olwyn Hughes, Ted Hughes’ sister.

All of these four biographies include photographs on insets in the middle of the book, accompanied by short descriptions. There are also biographies that include the pictures directly in the text, for example Diane Middlebrook’s *Her Husband: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. A Marriage*, but for this article I chose to concentrate on the more commonly used form.

When I began researching for this paper, my first task was to count the images and to arrange them in groups: There are altogether 97 photographs in the four biographies (cover-photos not included). Only 49 of them show Sylvia Plath, either alone or in company, 27 depict friends, schoolmates or companions. There are two photos of Otto Plath, her father and one of Aurelia Schober-Plath, her mother. One shows the author’s husband Ted Hughes with their daughter, Frieda. The other seventeen photos do not feature a person, but depict different places connected to Sylvia Plath. Two of the pictures show her grave, two are images of British landscapes and thirteen of the photographs depict houses which Plath inhabited in England and the US. None of the four biographies feature images that show Plath practicing her craft. There is not a single photography that depicts Plath sitting at her desk, holding a pen or typing. Instead, there are plenty that show her in her free-time as a girl or young woman or as a married mother of two as an adult. Andrew Wilson’s capsule biography focusses on Plath’s life before she married

Ted Hughes and became pregnant, so the fourteen images show Sylvia Plath as a young child and a radiant blonde in a swimsuit at the beach. The other three biographies include plenty of domestic and family pictures. *Method and Madness* by Edward Butscher contains fifteen photographs, ten of which show Plath, either alone, with Hughes, or with at least one of her children. Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* contains 22 photos, seven of which show Plath (two with her children, one with Hughes). And finally, Alexander's *Rough Magic* that includes 36 photographs, 18 of which depict Plath—none with the children, three with her husband.

What could be the possible explanation for this over-emphasizing of places on the one hand and of Plath's family and private life on the other? It is not possible to answer this question without bearing in mind the assigned functions of the pictures and their modes to accomplish this task. It basically comes down to the question: How should we read these pictures?

Houses, Biographies and Sylvia Plath

Almost thirteen percent of the photographs in the biographies of Alexander, Butscher, Stevenson and Wilson depict houses. According to Alison Booth (2016), "houses [...] hold the power of elegy to evoke memories of the dead. Houses represent families and heritage, comforts and pleasures, as well as gendered perils" (13). The places we live in have a deep impact on our physical and psychological well-being. In her landmark biography on Virginia Woolf, Hermione Lee (1997), devotes an entire chapter to the houses that were inhabited by Woolf. She describes, for example, the deep impact of Talland House:¹ "Talland House became, in Virginia Woolf's imagination and in the mind of her readers, something more than just a large square building near the sea in Cornwall. It is where she sites, for the whole of her life, the idea of happiness" (22). Lee also shows how Hyde Park Gate, the home of the Stephens family in London, generated the exact opposite feelings.

Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, like most writers, wrote at home, so there is a connection between the literary product and its production site. Although houses do carry biographical meaning, plain photographs that depict houses do not. Images of houses in literary biographies—like all the other images printed—need description and textual explanation (Boehm 2010, 19) to guide the reader's understanding and to provoke emotions. To demonstrate the interaction between image and text it is necessary to analyse photographs that occur frequently in biographies on Sylvia Plath by comparing the different captions. One such photo is for example a picture of the house on 23 Fitzroy Road in London where she committed suicide. It is very fruitful to use Richard Holmes' (2004) method of "Comparative Biography" (16) to show the arbitrariness of these photo-text-

¹ The house in St. Ives, Cornwall, where Virginia Stephen and her family spend her summers as a child.

combinations. “Comparative Biography” as described by Holmes in his paper “The Proper Study” is a device to analyse different biographies about the same person, which all claim to tell the truth (7-18). Paula Backscheider (2016) uses this method to analyse the “versioning” (276) of biographical subjects by revealing the inherent focus of the narrative that “can be a consequence of writing a thematic biography [or] the deliberate act of the biographer” (276).

Andrew Wilson’s (2013) *Mad Girl’s Love Song* creates an image of Plath as a young, ambitious but unstable woman. His caption of Plath’s high school graduation picture obviously follows this version: “When Sylvia heard that she had been accepted by Smith College she was thrilled. ‘I went about the house for days in a sort of trance’, she said.” The informal use of Plath’s first name Sylvia and the unidentified quote can easily be associated with a typical teenage girl. By way of contrast, Anne Stevenson’s Plath is a jealous, irritating woman whose fits of rage drive her husband away from her.² Whether these narratives are deliberately employed by the biographers or not can’t be discussed in this paper, but it is necessary to emphasize the variety of Sylvia Plath’s versions in her biographies.

Anne Stevenson’s *Bitter Fame* and Paul Alexander’s *Rough Magic* both feature a photography of Plath’s last address. It shows a typical British residence with two entrances and white window frames. The general condition of the building indicates an upper-class neighbourhood. Alexander’s (1991) caption goes: “23 Fitzroy Road in London, formerly Yeats’s house. Sylvia hoped that living there would make her work blessed.” Anne Stevenson (1989) writes: “The house at 23 Fitzroy Road where Sylvia Plath’s life ended.” What we can see very clearly in this example is how different the descriptions are. Alexander uses only Plath’s first name Sylvia, he emphasises the literary influence that Yeats had on her life. He uses the word “hope”, although the beholder is fully aware of the tragedy that happened in this house. Here lies another difference between biography and fiction. Readers of biographies always have at least some kind of knowledge about the subject before the reading (Schäfer 2012, 274). One could almost say that Alexander’s description is somehow cynical, especially because the photo that is next to the one of Yeats’ house is one of Sylvia Plath’s grave. Stevenson chooses another narrative: The picture of 23 Fitzroy road is the last one that is printed in the inset. The story that is told literally ends here.

Private Life, Biographies and Sylvia Plath

One possible explanation for the above-mentioned over-emphasising of Plath’s family and private life is that there aren’t any or not enough pictures of Plath practicing her craft. Anita Helle wrote two papers about Plath and her photographs that are somewhat contradictory. In “The Photographic Chamber of the Eye”:

² It is interesting that although Stevenson seems almost hostile towards Plath, the images in *Bitter Fame* include two facsimiles. It is therefore the only biography of the four that I analyzed that draws attention to her working process through the depicted images.

Plath, *Photography and the Post-Confessional Muse*” (2011) she states that, in contrast to some other writers of the 1950s and 60s, there is only a limited amount of photographs of Sylvia Plath. “Photographs in primary collections number in the dozens rather than hundreds. There is no synoptic archival image bank; many photographs of Plath herself are duplicated across various collections; copies appearing in biographies often repeat, often without attribution or dating, so they tend to float free from interpretive contexts” (32). By way of contrast, in her 2007 article Helle elaborates on the photographs that Plath and Hughes took of each other whilst writing, sketching or typing during their travels. (189) Some of the pictures in the four biographies that show Plath and Hughes are official writers’ portraits, even though they almost seem like private snapshots of the spouses; one example being the famous photograph of Rollie McKenna.

Another possible explanation could be Plath’s association with “confessional poetry”, a poetic movement in the USA that was well-known for using personal experiences as sources of the poems (Asotic 2015, 58). Although she never considered herself a confessional poet, she entertained relations with some of the movement’s most prominent members like Anne Sexton or Robert Lowell.

There is also a gender-related possibility. Pictures that show the biographical subject with babies or little children seldomly occur in men’s biographies. In *Reflections on Biography*, Paula Backscheider (1999) points out the importance of motherhood in women’s biographies. She writes: “Mothering somehow always becomes a measure of womanhood and female success” (147). Indeed, the four biographies constantly refer to Plath’s mothering, whereas biographies on childless women writers emphasise the lack of family. Both types try to establish a connection between having or not having children and the creative process. Anne Stevenson (1989) describes Plath’s state of mind after the birth of her daughter Frieda: “She was certain the birth would inspire new and better poems once she had her strength back” (191). Linda Wagner-Martin (1994) argues similarly in *Telling Women’s Lives* when she observes that women in biographies are usually defined by the roles they take, the mother, the daughter, the sister, the concubine...” (21-22). Sylvia Plath is portrayed as a writing mother of two and a writing wife, but she is not perceived as just a writer. Even her poems are analysed through the lens of female roles. Butscher (2003) interprets “Daddy” as a poem by the actual daughter and wife Sylvia Plath directed to Otto Plath and Ted Hughes. “Betrayal was an inevitable repetition of Otto’s abandonment: ‘The black telephone’s of at the root.’ But she no longer accepts either Otto’s or Ted’s treachery so easily” (338).

Scott Donaldson (2015) argues in *The Impossible Craft: Literary Biography* that emphasising the private life is something that is inherent to literary biographies in general. So his argument is not gender-related but concentrates on the biographer’s need to tell a story. Biographers need to write about the work of the portrayed subject and plain summaries or complex literary criticism brings the narrative to a halt. To avoid this, they try to connect life and work as much as possible (56-57).

Conclusion

One photograph that frequently occurs in biographies on Sylvia Plath shows the writer and her husband, Ted Hughes, on their honeymoon in Paris in 1956. The picture is in black and white and the quality of the reproduction is rather poor. Plath and Hughes stand in front of a house, his arm lying on her shoulder, both smiling. We find it in Wilson's *Mad Girl's Love Song* as well as in *Rough Magic* by Paul Alexander and in some other biographies that are not discussed in this paper. Originally taken as a private snapshot by Sylvia Plath's brother Warren, it has turned into one of the most well-known pictures of the famous couple Plath/Hughes. Nevertheless, it is used in the biographies to illustrate her private and family life. Just like this picture blurs the boundaries between private and public spaces by crossing them back and forth, the argument of this article is that a strict differentiation between public and private cannot help us reading and understanding the photographs in Plath's biographies. In accordance with Mieke Bal and Marita Sturken, I plead for a simultaneity of public and private. For Bal (2004), photography, as a ubiquitous phenomenon, makes a strict differentiation between public and private obsolete. In her paper "Light Writing. Portraiture in a Post-Traumatic Age" she examines the examples of private snapshots that reappear in art exhibitions or school books and therefore oscillate the spheres (1-19). Sturken (1999) differentiates three kinds of memory in her article "The Image as Memorial: Personal Photographs in Cultural Memory": the personal memory, the cultural memory and history. She defines personal memory as "memories that remain solely within personal and familial contexts" and history as "a form of sanctioned narratives of the past" (178). For Sturken, cultural memory is "imbued with cultural meaning" but doesn't follow history's modes of narrative and discourse (178). She emphasizes the role of (family) photographs in shaping those kinds of memories:

As technologies of memory, photographs play a primary role in the traffic between personal memory, cultural memory, and history. When personal memories are shared and exchanged in contexts distinct from history making, they form a kind of collective memory, either as interventions into or resistance to official history. Cultural objects, photographs among them, often move from personal memory to cultural memory to history and back. (178-179).

The picture of Plath and Hughes on their honeymoon is an example of a cultural object that embodies cultural memory. A former private snapshot of two newly-weds turns from personal memory into cultural memory. As a cultural object it is therefore used in the biographies as evidence for the privacy and intimacy between the happy couple, oscillating between the public and private sphere. This evidential function is not the only one. As mentioned before, readers of biographies always have at least little knowledge about the portrayed subject before the reading. So we expect readers of biographies on Sylvia Plath to be aware of her terrible death. Marianne Hirsch (2002), drawing on Barthes, sees the photograph as an object that connects present and absent: "The referent haunts the picture like a ghost: it is a

revenant, a return of the lost and dead other” (5). Mieke Bal (2004) shares this opinion when she writes about the “memorial power” (4) of photographs. If we look at the before-mentioned photo that was taken for Plath’s high school graduation we see a beautiful, radiant and seemingly self-confident girl, but the picture simultaneously carries the cultural myth of the suicidal poet and creator of works like *Ariel*. The biographer’s role therefore lies in referring to this meaning beyond the surface by giving the photograph its caption. By doing this he or she can guide the picture’s reading according to the version of Sylvia Plath that he or she creates throughout the biography.

The function of photographs in literary biographies remains somehow unclear. They have evidential character and they “offer a set of semiotic codes that suture the verbal with the textual to ensure the authenticity of the content.” (Nadel 2014, 66) Regardless of this fact, they usually do not stand for themselves but are accompanied by textual ekphrases, that clarify, explain and interpret (Boehm 2010, 19), and are, thus, reduced to an illustrative function.

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