

**In Search of the Symbolic Truth about Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath
in Kate Moses's *Wintering* and Susan Schaeffer's *Poison***

**Hristo Boev
"Konstantin Preslavsky" University of Shumen
Bulgaria**

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Abstract

Attaining the status of a recognized genre of fiction via postmodernism with its immanent polyphony and deconstructivist possibilities, biofiction in the last two decades of the 20th century eventually became a neat blend of biographical fact and literary fiction with a hybrid aesthetic which opened new perspectives for both enquiries into and interpretations of this kind of fiction in the 21st century. While biographies are still studied and used as references to historical figures, recent criticism has also considered some of the biographical novels as relevant sources about their fascinating lives. With the unwaning interest in the "star-crossed" lives of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath and the enormous amount of critical material about them in the form of numerous biographies, monographs, articles, and films, at least five well-known novels have tried to shed light on their tumultuous relationship and marriage culminating with the intention to start divorce proceedings and Plath's suicide. This paper will explore empathy, endurance, authenticity and readability in two of them – Kate Moses's *Wintering* (2003) and Susan Schaeffer's *Poison* (2006) while making a commentary on the ever-elusive symbolic truth about the two poets that both novels attempt to illuminate.

Keywords: *empathy, biofiction, authenticity, readability, endurance, symbolic truth.*

1. The two writers, the problematics of the novels and controversy of their (in)famous subjects

Kate Moses is an American writer, born in 1962, San Francisco, USA, passionate about mothers and motherhood as a topic, writer of *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* (2003) following extensive research into the life and works of the American poet, a daunting task commemorating and bringing to life Sylvia Plath in her last months in London 1963 in a full impersonation marking the 40th anniversary of Plath's death. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer was an American writer and Professor of English at Brooklyn College, born in 1940, Brooklyn, New York, USA, died in 2011, Chicago, Illinois, USA, author of numerous biographical novels among which *Poison* (2006) – she wrote the book knowing the members of Hughes family personally and while being in communication with some of them. Hers is a detached approach underscoring the unreliability of the memory and its reconstruction.

In the "Author's Note" to her novel on Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, Emma Tennant writes, "Events described in the book are based on fact, but *Ted and Sylvia* is, nevertheless, a work of the imagination" (Tennant 2003: 7). Banal as the note sounds, the opposition fact – fiction (imagination) is still considered to be one of the key distinctions between biographies and biographical novels although the postmodernist differentiation between the two leaves one with the impression of similitude, if not sameness. Regardless of the disclaimers that the authors place before their works, we can talk about specific incursions into the lives of living or deceased people, appropriation of facts and their free interpretation, often without the approval of the relatives of the respective people. While this necessarily must be so for a biography or a biographical novel to pursue its agenda after the truth about the subject, ethical issues almost always remain unresolved. Despite their recognized transgressive nature, both biographies and biofictions should continue being produced not only because of the unwaning interest of the public in this genre of writing but also because of the creation of a new aesthetic in the making that will certainly form

a new reading public and will determine the appearance of a new reception that this genre of life writing necessitates. Although existing as two options, and despite their similar overall effect, the fictional and nonfictional recreation of a historical personality are not on equal footing, biographies enjoying a kind of an elite status as the “truth-tellers” or “truth-sayers” while biographical novels can be easily dismissed as “pure fiction”, however well they have interpreted the facts. When a biographical writer opts for the biographical novel rather than its nonfictional counterpart, we should understand that it might be to get away with murder.

With her intense poet’s life and dramatic untimely death in which she became both a trailblazer in fiction and an object of unflagging fascination through her fictional and extrafictional expression of the self, Plath has stirred an enormous amount of critical interest which persists well into the 21st century – as Michael Benton remarks, “Sylvia Plath’s suicide [...] has provoked ‘a posthumous life’ of over forty years, a decade longer than her actual life, during which time she has achieved remarkable fame” (Benton 2009: 58)¹. This critic goes on to list at least four extraliterary reasons for this fame which are the object of the biographical recreation of the poet, and namely: her early death aged 30, her marriage to Ted Hughes and his tampering with her literary estate, the control over this estate on part of himself and his sister, Olwyn Hughes, and the coincidence of her death with the Second-Wave feminist movement for which she became an icon especially with *The Bell Jar* (1963), as well as with *Ariel* (1965) (59). Due to the high level of control over everything Plathian, the facts were

¹ Another useful recapitulation in the same vein can be found in Heather Clark’s *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (2020) where the author claims that “Since her suicide in 1963, Sylvia Plath has become a paradoxical symbol of female power and helplessness whose life has been subsumed by her afterlife” (p. 14). This biography also claims to be free of censorship imposed by Plath’s or Hughes’s estate (p. 15). – a. n.

compromised with the very first biographies, yet the fictional was instantly deemed worthy material of the biographical since Plath is largely considered to be confessional (autobiographical) (pp. 59-60)². Alongside the numerous studies on the American female writer which have been appropriately labeled “Plathology” due to the detailed and comprehensive knowledge that has been gathered, biographical novels have also made their contribution in providing metacriticism, but also have further fictionalized Plath, thus making valuable additions to both Plath’s works (poetry and prose) and to the extant criticism. With Plath’s well-known suffering from depression, especially before her marriage and at the end of it, also exacerbated by Ted Hughes’s frequent infidelity (Assia Wevill’s affair, among others), most of the biographers, literary critics and casual readers have taken Plath’s side, portraying or viewing her as a frail woman³, a tragic victim to both Eisenhower’s overly masculinized and often misogynist America and Ted Hughes’s increasingly neglectful treatment of his wife which would occasionally turn violent and which was to lead to their effective break-up in July 1962. Plath’s proven resilience to overwhelming hardships was tested yet again through Ted’s permanent split from her and the unbearable

² A case in point among many others is an early biography on Plath by Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1988) who in her “Preface” speaks of the enormous difficulties in dealing with both Ted and Olwyn Hughes while trying to obtain information about Plath and refer to her texts in the book (p.13). – a. n.

³ Few writers have proved to be as controversial as Sylvia Plath, with such a vastly changing reception over time, especially with Western Europe’s recent return to the so-called “traditional values and morality” associated with the rise of the far right. Nowadays, alongside with the academic discourse about Plath’s significance in our times we can hear the strident screams of self-righteous promoters of such values as evidenced in Heather Clark’s biography on Plath from 2020 – *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* who refers to an article from 2017 that labels Plath the ultimate “female monster” (Clark 2020: 14).

conditions of one of the worst winters of the century – the winter of 1963; Plath's harrowing struggle was eventually curbed on 11 February the same year in London through her suicide, an abandoned wife with two infant children. Ted Hughes, in his turn, despite his restrictions on and dismissal of the so-called "Plathology", thus equating it to what he would pejoratively term "Plath fantasia", has become the object of a similar fictionalization since his life and works could hardly be extricated from the life he had with Plath and the consequences he came to face after it was ended. Unsurprisingly, there were radicals such as Robin Morgan with her "Arraignment" with her (in)famous first line "I Accuse Ted Hughes"; she deemed him a mortal danger to women, insisting on his castration, opposed by the staunchest of allies in his and Plath's daughter, Frieda Hughes, who declared herself appalled at the hatred her father came to bear (Boev 2021: 44). Those who hoped for a final revelation on part of Ted Hughes that would redeem him from the accusations of censorship on Plath's life and works as represented by the biographies, should have known better – Hughes remained unapologetic even in his last collection of poetry, the confessional *Birthday Letters* (1998) where the poem "Error", one of the few of his poems kind to Plath, portrays her as foreign to England (Devon) despite her "stripping off her American royalty, garment by garment" (T. Hughes 1999: 123). "Soul-naked and stricken" (123). Plath is viewed as completely helpless and vulnerable, and while this helplessness and vulnerability should be disarming, Ted Hughes was not exactly or not always the gentle giant that he projected himself to be and was often seen as such by his supporters and sympathizers.

Despite their aim at objectivity, given the strongly polarized camps subconsciously or consciously siding with one or the other protagonist, Plath's and Hughes' biographers, with all their conscientiousness in handling the matter, overcoming the obstacles to the truth behind the scenes occasioned by Ted and his sister Olwyn's obstructions, have largely produced what Elena Ciobanu in her

monograph on Plath, after going through and commenting briefly on the extant ones by the year of publishing, has labeled “biased stories” (Ciobanu 2009: 31), being skeptical of the biographical readings of Plath’s poetry. With the deaths of both Ted (1998) and Olwyn Hughes (2016), recent literary biographers and critics can no longer plead the aforesaid difficulties. Yet, biased criticism and biographism, as far as Ted and Sylvia are concerned, are bound to continue since the authors of the biographical works remain only human, just like their fictionalized main characters.

A more honest way of fictionalizing public figures may be biographical fiction since it does not have the pretense to deal with facts only but reserves itself the right to be fictional while remaining partly factological. Essentially, biographical fiction in its hybrid nature of fiction and criticism creates an aesthetic while raising some doubts about its insights into the life of the historical figure, even if done properly due to its fictional component. It attempts to attain an authenticity of the reproduction which comes only with this mode of writing in the ever-elusive chase after the symbolic truth to which empirical facts are typically subordinated (Lackey 2016: 12).

Despite those above, a biographical novelist should heed the warning sounded by Frieda Hughes who from the “Forward” to the restored edition of *Ariel* advises that her mother has “in some cases [been] completely fabricated” (F. Hughes 2018: xviii)⁴. Therefore, while performing the precarious balancing act of walking on the tightrope that would be the ideal blend of biographical fact and pure fiction, the biographical novelist as a trapeze artist has the complete set of tricks up his/ her sleeve to amaze the audience, and that includes casual readers and serious critics. Also, inherently, s/he may experience the grand failure of the attempt without the recourse of the safety net – which would be the overall impression that the personality and the pertaining

⁴ Also referenced in Boev, Hristo’s *Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath’s Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction* (15). – a. n.

circumstantial facts of the fictionalized life have been grossly misrepresented.

A misstep as regards Plath in both criticism and biofiction is surprisingly easy to make although questionable in effect but without a redeeming grace, with all the existing knowledge of the writer, due to Plath's multifaceted nature and her own different sometimes provocative manifestations of herself in life and transgressive projections of herself in her works: novel, poetry, short stories, *Journals*, and *Letters*. Plath wrote with a clear sense of purpose depending on the genre and form of writing, which renders her a contradictory figure if we juxtapose all the available data on her life and works; for instance, it is the short stories, letters and some of the early poetry where her gentle nature shows through while the novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), despite the mask of the protagonist-narrator Ester Greenwood, and part of her later poetry, portray her as the cold-blooded ice queen she was seen by many of her acquaintances (Boev 2021: 196). It is in light of what has been said so far that we can compare Kate Moses's highly acclaimed *Wintering* (2003) and Susana Fromberg Shaeffer's less known *Poison* (2006).

2. *Wintering* – the consequences of full-blown empathy

In *Wintering*, with its full title: *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath*, Kate Moses seems to have done the impossible – that is, impersonate Plath so well that we can almost see her materialized, moving inside the house, doing the house chores, taking loving care of her two children – Frieda and Nicolas; we can feel her breath, hear the sound of her steps echoing off the London streets around “Yeats's apartment”, tasting “the pounding of her sleepless tannic heart, squeezing in her chest” (Moses 2003: 75). Her whole life is being presented to us in its minutest detail through her imagined feminine consciousness not unlike Virginia Woolf's rendition of the fictional Clarissa Dalloway from *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) only in a much more intimate manner to the point that it almost feels uncanny. To do so, Kate Moses has used all the available

documentary material – critical biographies, the autofictional prose and poetry and has given each chapter a title from Plath's original arrangement of the poems in *Ariel*, having also indicated the month and the year 1962, the year of writing the poems. The titles of the poems do not always mark a full correspondence to the events described therein, thus creating a sensation of portraying something larger than fiction, made of flesh and blood, as life naturally almost always is. This asymmetry produces a wonderful effect of having a multidimensional sensorial cinematic experience of intimacy with Sylvia Plath in her last months of life in London, England. Still this portrayal, based so much on sensations instilled in the readers although completely convincing, contains the immanent duality of the unmentioned: uncovered by documentation, unexpressed through the means of fiction or nonfiction, the forever hidden dark side of the Moon. Due to the extensive use of autobiographical (autofictional) material Plath appears to us, the readers, well-versed in Plathology, so life-like and real – the Plath that we know. Yet, we should not forget that it is largely this Plathology then in the making that Ted Hughes tried to control but unable to fully do so, eventually dismissed as "Plath fantasia" – by editing her poetry, rearranging the *Ariel* poems, removing parts of Plath's *Journals*, and possibly destroying unfinished novels (at least one) Ted Hughes has perhaps unwittingly contributed to the myths surrounding his suicidal first wife for with the enormous interest in a deceased personality the absence of fact is quickly filled with fiction⁵.

It is worth quoting a passage from Kate Moses's book to appreciate the effects that she creates impersonating Plath:

What has happened to her customary morning dread, the sharp stink of her panic? Where is her more orthodox heart with its

⁵ One of the Plathian inspirations, a direct result of Hughes's interference with the *Journals* is Kimberly Knutsen's famous novel *The Lost Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2015). – a. n.

quick metallic ticking, the grinding in her chest? Her mind searches for it, that familiar hemorrhage of fear, the known morning ritual of materializing terror – the terror of what she doesn't know as much as what she does – that has greeted her upon waking since July. She listens: as if it might be recoverable, lost for a moment here in the covers, lurking still in the chill air of the heatless room. It's gone, though, for this morning, receded like the tide for these quick seconds of semiconscious assessment, of her life coming into focus (9).

The expressionist strain in Moses's writing is visible. The above passage is as good as any other in illustrating the sensation of anxiety interwoven in the text's fabric, appearing at moments in Emma Tennant's representation of Plath as well. While we may agree that we are faced with a similar sensation from some of the poems, notably "The Rabbit Catcher" and "The Jailer", parts of the *Journals* and some of the last letters, notably from the ones to her therapist Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse aka by her maiden name Ruth Beuscher, as well as the fact that Plath may have appeared to be anxious in some of the time spent with others, insisting on anxiety as a solid trait of the fictional Plath in *Wintering* does reduce the writer to a potentially nervous wreck of a person and that is when she was not suffering from a depressive episode. The book being so pregnant with Plath's presence, does not have much to say about Ted Hughes, since he is seen through the eyes of the abandoned woman who typically sees her husband on visitation days mostly walking away from her into the unknown uncontrolled environment of London, potentially rife with possibilities for infidelity, which at this point is already a rather dubious term: "Though it was later, after he'd escaped their latest failure into the tiled entrance of the Chalk Farm tube, his black back hunched in his coat and descending into dark as she watched him leave, another step, the ring of his boot on the stair, so quickly it was over" (Moses 2003: 10). Alternatively, but to

little avail, there is the reminiscence of the good old days. Plath's anger with Hughes, well documented in some of the last letters, as well as the abovementioned poems, is also present in the evaluation of her new situation in Moses's book: "her husband has become a liar and a cheat, a man she doesn't recognize. He has killed their marriage. He's carried it away, limp in his hands, and forked it over with dirt; she'll never find it again" (15). This extended metaphor echoes some of the more desperate 1962 letters, especially after the sharp change in July in the aftermath of which Plath understood her marriage already belonged to the past. Just like in the literary evidence left by Plath in her letters accompanying the writing of *Ariel*, Moses's novel emphasizes the significance the poems likely had for Plath: "It's her poems [...] that are spoon-feeding her self-confidence she needs. They are her nectar, her royal jelly; she'll emerge from this stronger than she was. She feels like a warrior queen, poised, victorious in her bathrobe" (16). Undoubtedly, this sounds inspiring, if not uplifting – the abandoned wife fighting all odds, a true revelation for the unacquainted readers of the novel, but for the connoisseurs of Plath's *oeuvre*, including the *Letters* and *Journals*, this is a mere repetition, perhaps a bit overdramatized since Plath, being so self-conscious, never lapsed into unnecessary drama – constantly painfully aware of the respective form of writing she was using. The given examples are only a few out of literally hundreds that can be cited from Kate Moses's novel on Plath. Here it is timely to point out that dissenting from most of the glowing reviews, *The Guardian's* observations underscore some of the remarks already made:

Most people are guilty of Plathophilia or an equivalent obsession with someone they have never met. The quiet genius doesn't thrill; we require an inferno in human form. But an intellectual crush is like any other infatuation, overwhelming for the lover and awkward for the rest of the world. How should we respond to the flushed over-identification with the sufferer? (Green).

And more to the point:

Can Kate Moses describe it to us adequately? Her oversensualisation of the everyday rings false. Perhaps every nerve ending is exposed and every child's shriek sounds like the chorus in a Greek tragedy when you feel like Plath felt. Yet it seems a curious mission to try and reconstruct this hell when many of the involved parties are still alive and there are few historical gaps to fill. The letters Plath wrote and the volumes of her journal which survive are testament to her dissembling and contradictory nature as well as her genuine brilliance. Which is why, while appreciating the occasional elegance of this imaginative novel, you need to turn to Plath's work itself in order to find the true heat (Green).

The "overidentification with the sufferer" that is remarked in the article, the uncanny embodiment or incarnation of Plath that has garnered so much praise, including from iconic Plath critics, could also be termed *full-blown empathy*. As such, in a book, it can only work as a pathological condition that denies the right of the living person to differ somewhat or substantially from the image one makes of him or her by reading that person's literary production, albeit (auto)biographical. In this paper I argue that it is to the detriment of our proper understanding of the fictionalized personality to deal with such an approach in biofiction since we identify a living person with their literary (auto)fictions by leaving no healthy space for what is never mentioned in fiction even if the text were to catalog that person's life: actions, sensations and perceptions by the minute, like most of Karl Ove Knausgaard's sensational novel series *My Struggle* (2009-2011). If nothing else, we would inevitably come into a head-on collision with the capacity of language to render lived experience, which, even in the most sophisticated language, has its limits. In defense of Kate Moses, I would like to refer to her own words when interviewed by Michael

Lackey in his *Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (2014): to the question what had compelled her to write the novel, she responds that it was to render justice both to Plath and her poems, and more specifically: “it was clear that she saw those poems as saving her, and the story they told was essential to how they would be read. They were her redemption” (Lackey 2014: 163). Her overwhelming empathy for Plath stems from a similar personal experience regarding marriage as evidenced in the same interview (164) resulting in an absorbing identification with Plath which has allowed the blending of her consciousness with what Moses has perceived Plath’s to be in the *Ariel* poems. It is interesting to note that Moses correctly establishes the advantages that biofiction would have over a biography, as far as Plath is concerned, and her answer to the questions should be quoted in full:

I felt that a biography of a book of literary criticism was not going to have the expansiveness of imagination that would be required to illuminate Plath’s psychology and her emotions at the time that she was putting *Ariel* together. If I were to have written my book on Plath as nonfiction, I would have to write a book in which I was projecting possibilities that I couldn’t know for sure. Actually I never considered writing from a nonfictional perspective. I was trying to understand Plath’s feelings, her interior landscape, how she responded internally to the circumstances of her life, how she transformed those circumstances into metaphor and image and symbol, not just in her poetry but in her self-concept. A work of nonfiction would have restricted me in revealing interior truths about Plath (165).

Apart from the reference to the imagination as a key component of biofiction, Moses makes a fascinating comment on not being able to outline certain *projected possibilities* if she based her work strictly on facts. She also reaches out for Lackey’s concept of the symbolic truth by

speaking of *interior truths*, which she must have felt existed in the process of identification with her protagonist. Essentially, Moses performs a biographical reading of *Ariel* and reconstructs Plath's last months in London by decoding *metaphor*, *image* and *symbol*, using her *imagination*. While the impersonation is striking, as already observed, it does not go without complications in the reception of the text, which goes to show that despite the correctness of the judgment about the fictional representation of the American poet as being advantageous over the nonfictional one, still the underwater snags should not have been overlooked.

Apart from *empathy* and *authenticity*, the other trait I would like to explore in the novel is *readability*. How readable is Kate Moses's *Wintering*? The *oversensualization* and *overidentification* that *The Guardian's* article refers to are real issues in the text because we invariably sound off-key if we try to replicate a historical figure's life based on their writings alone or even combined with well-documented moments of intimacy with others. In the first case we would be dramatizing one's life extracted from its (auto)fictional representation. We should not feel reassured by Frieda Hughes's appraisal of her mother's achievement: "her own words describe her best, her ever-changing moods defining the way she viewed her world" (F. Hughes 2004: xviii) – these are words that a daughter can say about a mother that she lost at the age of three. In the second, we can only cite and comment on such intimations, still the person that once lived remains shrouded in the mystery of his/ her perception by the others and ultimately, by ourselves as readers, whether or not we have in mind the autofictions or meetings with others. It is due to such difficulties, I believe, that there is not a single good film adaptation of Byron's life. Keats's biographical *Bright Star* (2009) is saved only by Keats's exceptional poetry recited with passion by Ben Whishaw (Keats's impersonator). To really see a historical figure in film or fiction, we should perhaps take a step back and instead of entering their

consciousness, we could take a naturalistic approach and describe only what we can actually see or imagine we could see. Thus, instead of instilling our own convictions about the everyday of that person, we would allow the benefit of the doubt and authenticity will be achieved based on the mutual agreement – of the biofiction novelist/ film director and the reader/ viewer that the historical figure in question might have looked, behaved, felt like that under seemingly well-known circumstances. Gwyneth Paltrow's role of Sylvia Plath from the movie *Sylvia* (2003) is a valiant attempt to render the unrenderable in film.

3. *Poison* – taking a step back; the correlation of *empathy* and *authenticity*

A very different approach to Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes can be seen in Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Poison* (2006). The latter is a 600-page novel that does not even pretend to be related to the American confessional poet. Instead, Schaeffer's text presents the story of an imaginary writer, Peter Grosvenor who lives in the wake of the suicide of his second wife (lover) who kills their daughter with herself. He also dies to be outlived by his children, second (third) wife, and sister, who are constantly bickering over how they should interpret the past and divide Peter's and Evelyn's literary estates and material inheritance. Despite the typical disclaimer in such cases advising against seeking similarities with persons live or dead, the similarities are too obvious to be ignored. The characters are in the order of their appearance in the book: Peter (Ted Hughes), Evelyn (Sylvia Plath-Hughes), Sigrid (Olwyn Hughes), Sophie (Frieda Hughes), Andrew (Nicholas Hughes), Petra (Shura), Meena (Carol Hughes), Elfie (Assia Wevill), Charlotte (Aurelia Plath), Rose (most likely Elaine Feinstein – a friend to Hughes's family) and Julia (Susan Schaeffer herself). Unlike many other works on the two poets – fiction and nonfiction, this novel pays special attention to Carol Hughes (Meena) and the life she must lead surrounded by hostility from all members of the Hughes family. Far from being as glamorous as her predecessors in Hughes's intimate life, Meena (Carol) is portrayed as

bitter and peevish, often at the receiving end of the other members' rather cruel jokes. At the opening, Peter (Ted), having embraced the positive image he has had of himself in others, tells a tale to his children about himself as a gentle giant under a curse trying to explain away his womanizing proclivity as well as the death toll this takes in women (Schaeffer 2006: 1-18). The protagonist's approach, thriftily bestowed on him by Schaeffer, is nevertheless natural and feels authentic since this is the way to present such facts to your own small children while admitting to some responsibility, which, little as it is, remains the only one Peter (Ted) will take in the book, dying shortly after that. This largely corresponds to Ted Hughes's unapologetic stance towards Plath or Assia, also presented in his farewell poetry collection *Birthday Letters* (1998), which portrays Plath as belonging to another world, often failing to understand others, and being misunderstood in turn. Poems such as "Error" and "Life after Death" are the gentlest Hughes will ever get as regards his first wife, also because she has given him two children. *Poison* neatly reflects the situation Ted Hughes found himself in – with the close presence of his sister, being married to another woman – Carol, the children trying to come to terms with the loss of their mother and little sister from another mother (Shura), their father's tumultuous past and his role as some *homme fatal*. One must admit this is a bit too much to bear for a man even if he had the necessary superhuman capacity to deal with drama and tragedy; hence, the step towards the world of the fairy tales is not a big one to make. The brevity of Peter's (Ted's) live presence in Schaeffer's novel (the tale about the cursed giant) corresponds to the relatively little information we have as regards Ted Hughes's overall evaluation of his relationships with Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill, respectively: he rejected any contribution to the "Plath fantasia" and remained dismissive of any involvement with Assia. Hughes's comments on Plath through Peter sound authentic being seeped in Hughes's English sense of humour while correctly reflecting Plath's posthumous life:

[Sigrid]: She said there's no point in even trying to speak sensibly of Evelyn. She's already a myth. 'Well,' said Peter. 'I don't see what I can do about that. Evelyn wanted fame and she got rather more than even she would have expected. Although she didn't live to enjoy it. The dead don't read reviews. That's the good part of being dead, I suppose' (Schaeffer 2006: 17).

The seamless blending of fiction and reality is highlighted further by the ubiquitous Sigrid's (Olwyn's) confirmation that "when it comes to women, I think you *are* under a curse" (17) and also by the subtle all too English comment on the pointlessness of trying to discuss a mythologized personality in a manner that would make any sense, thus providing a metacritical remark that casts doubt on the soundness of the extant Plath lore, evoking Hughes's dismissal of it.

Fromberg Schaeffer also regularly employs fleeting remarks said by Evelyn (Plath) in the reminiscence of the characters that can be safely attributed to Plath – facts around which she builds the fiction as in "when Evelyn had so astoundingly said, 'I don't want children, I want to write and paint and travel,' and then one day, she suddenly changed her mind" (29). Plath and Hughes's break-up is also given in retrospect without delving too much into expressionism: "She grew ever more jealous, suspicious, but she had her pride; she was the one who left him, went to London and left him there" (29). Fromberg Schaeffer takes some liberties with the facts – mentioning that Peter married Elsie (35) – Ted Hughes never married Assia Wevill, but this does not contradict the established image of the "cursed giant" who cannot turn attractive women away, instead of sending them off with a biscuit, as Sophie playfully suggests he should have done (10). Plath's possible bipolarity is strongly implied with alternating euphoria and dysphoria: "Sigrid wondered if Peter thought back to that day before he died, and she understood clearly as never before why Evelyn had so charmed him,

exciting Evelyn, unpredictable Evelyn, un unpredictable storm of moods, of weeping and laughing, a ravenousness for life such as he had never seen before" (43). Plath's haunting presence in Ted Hughes's life is also properly rendered through the numerous references to her in the entire text, often in association with Hughes and in situations that are unpredictable enough to create a sensation of realism. Reconstructing the past is done within the veil of the impossible task:

[Andrew] as a boy, he used to wonder if his mother, his real mother, Evelyn, had died not on earth but on a distant star, how long would the light from that star take to reach this earth, and when it did reach the earth, how could you retrieve the images of what had happened on that other star? (62).

The astrophysical reasoning and imagery align with Nicholas's interest in science and the fact that he went on to become a respected biologist, like his grandfather, Otto Plath. Fromberg Schaeffer's book recreates the closest we can get to fully fleshed characters, albeit in retrospection, portraying Peter (Ted) and Evelyn (Sylvia) as inextricably connected (590). *Poison* is a biofiction about Peter's (Ted's) life. Still, his life is seen as so intertwined with Evelyn's (Sylvia's) that the book is finally about them both and the *poison* that has led to Evelyn's tragedy – the things we could change in a marriage but that gradually slip out of hand until we are left with the smoldering ruins of a fire burning bright and promising well for the husband and wife. Schaeffer had firsthand contact with both Ted and Olwyn Hughes, knew personally Carol, Nicholas and Frieda Hughes and her writing definitely reflects this personal knowledge of the live people rather than the myths and despite the writer's mythologizing both Plath and Hughes in her own way, Peter Steinberg, who has a comprehensive blog on Sylvia Plath, wonders "what coloring Schaeffer provided as she wrote or, if in fact it is actually something closer to the straight truth" (Steinberg). Not

empathizing so much with Evelyn (Plath) – recreated in the memory of the survivors – provides the necessary distance we need to be able to see the massive personality in its full dimensions; by contrast, a close-up look would leave us immersed in detail whose meaning we may not be able to figure out while completely blurring the outlines. Empathizing more with Peter (Hughes) – his being granted the desired image of a good-hearted giant who cannot say “No” to women – portrays him in a sympathetic manner. We have the necessary details of the close-up view, still we are aware at all times of things we are missing since the author does not impersonate him but takes a stance observing what the protagonist does from a safe distance, what we get as perceptions of people while being with them for a brief period. Undoubtedly, wishing to create an imbalanced dynamic of the portrayal of Plath and Hughes, Schaeffer gives some live presence to Hughes – the first 17 pages – which is synchronized with the action in the book. After that he is consigned to memory, just like his first wife – Plath. Although imbalanced, the portrayal of the two protagonists does not feel biased since Hughes’s live presence is indeed very limited, compared to the hundreds of pages where he appears in memory, like Plath. Also, the different representations of the two poets, husband and wife, correspond to how we meet people, how we perceive them, and finally, what understanding we get from having known them from a certain distance.

The uneven dispersal of *empathy* arguably only slightly favours Ted Hughes while leaving solid room for the benefit or detriment of the doubt in both. This, in turn, creates a very strong sense of authenticity of the representation with enough food for the imagination to supply what the author has omitted.

Conclusions

While remaining in the shadow of Kate Moses's *Wintering*, Fromberg Schaeffer's *Poison* makes a solid claim for being one of the best, if not the best, attempts to fictionalize Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes employing numerous techniques to establish authenticity, which borders on the seemingly possible but realistically unattainable factological truth about the unmentioned. In its bold attempt, however, it comes close to what we could call "a symbolic truth" – what we feel would be the most authentic representation of the two poets, especially under duress. In this, it is this article's author's view that it surpasses Kate Moses's *Wintering* despite the excellent documentation on part of the latter. Despite the length of Fromberg Schaeffer's novel – almost twice as long as that of Kate Moses's – I believe it makes an easier read due to the presence of characters with different names from the ones associated with Plath and Hughes. They are inhabited by the acknowledgment of the impossible consignment to paper of enchanting lives seen at a distance or studied through literary and nonliterary sources, a deconstructivist approach. The recognition of this fact and the respective detachment of the writer have yielded more sustainable results than the complete impersonation, even incarnation of Sylvia Plath in Moses's book. Both biographical novels deserve more attention alongside the numerous biographies, monographs, and articles on Plath and Hughes as a contribution to their knowledge, as well as their own genre of hybrid writing with its specific aesthetic.

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Hristo Boev

affiliation: Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, Faculty of Humanities

position: Associate Professor PhD

e-mail: h.boev@shu.bg

research interests: Geocriticism, Literary Phenomenology, Literary Urbanism, Modernism, the Victorian Age, the Art of Translation.

Selected publications:

- (2023): "The Autofictional Ailing Self: Depression in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Cella Serghi's *The Spider's Web* - a Comparison" (Hristo Boev), in *Studies in Linguistics, Culture and FLT*, vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 110-129.
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